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Title: Matt's Tale Vol. IV

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Virginia bolted from the  
cave and, in her  
exuberance, rode headlong  
through the winding  
tunnels. Deeper and  
deeper into the caverns  
she rode and, after  
realizing that she was

lost, slowed to a walk.  
She noticed that her  
spell of light was waning,  
but up ahead in a  
widening of the tunnel  
she saw a dim glow. As  
she rode ahead, the  
tunnel opened into a room  
from which came loud  
laughter, strong language  
and the sounds of  
combat. She then heard  
the death cry of a solen.  
Pressing on into the  
room, she came up behind  
a semi-circle of men that  
were quite inebriated and  
raucous. Beyond the group  
of men lay the corpse of  
a solen queen. One of the  
men was sitting on a keg  
and turned a bearded  
face towards Virginia.

"You there! Come closer!"  
the bearded one ordered  
her. Virginia dismounted  
and strode towards the  
gang. "Do you wish to  
join us in our little  
game?" he asked,  
motioning to the room  
with an extended arm. "If  
you live, you may claim  
your loot. If you die...  
well, you die!" He bellowed  
a loud laugh that was  
echoed by the others  
present. While still

laughing, the bearded one  
plunged his hand into a  
basket at his feet and  
withdrew a small piece of  
wood and read a name  
that was written on it.  
"Sir Trevor! You are  
next!"

A warrior stood up from  
the group and walked to  
the center of the room  
drawing his sword. As the  
fighter readied himself,  
the others called out  
insults, made wagers and  
gulped more ale. The  
warrior took his stance  
and peered into the  
darkness of the far side  
of the room. Charging  
out of the gloom, a solen  
queen lumbered towards  
the swordsman. The  
fighter was lightening  
fast. He darted in and  
out on the insect and,  
when close, would land a  
grievous blow onto one of  
the queen's legs. The  
warrior continued his  
onslaught to the cheers  
of those that bet in his  
favor. When all seemed  
lost for the solen, the  
creature suddenly veered  
wildly and vomited up a  
gush of acid that  
completely soaked the  
brave one. In shock, the  
man gazed upon his  
broadsword as it fizzed  
and popped. His shock  
turned to horror as he  
watched the gauntlet that  
held the sword begin to  
erode, followed quickly by  
the flesh of his hand.  
The sword fell from  
boned fingers, and it  
seemed that the warrior  
was sinking into the floor  
of the cave. It was not  
that he was sinking, but  
rather that his feet and  
legs were dissolving out  
from underneath him. The  
swordsman emitted a torn  
scream and collapsed with

a splash into the acid pool. It only took a moment for the man's armour and flesh to become indistinguishable in the slurry. The revelers in the circle hooted and gaffawed and slapped each others backs, and great sums of gold were exchanged.

The bearded one motioned again to Virginia. "So, do you wish to play?" he said with a grin.

Remembering her pledge to the ambitious queen, Virginia reached into her pack and withdrew a blank rune block. She carved her name in it with her knife, tossed the block into the basket and shrugged. And so the procession went on. Solen queens died, men died, gold was won and lost, and ale was quaffed.

"Plain! Virginia Plain!

You're next!" the bearded one cried out, holding the wooden block aloft.

Virginia mounted and rode to the center of the room. Behind her she could hear the men snickering and the bearded one say, "Gentlemen, gentlemen! You will have to give me odds! This waif doesn't stand a chance. How about it then, let's say twenty to one?" Virginia hunched her shoulders, lowered her head and began murmuring to herself.

The solen queen erupted from the darkness and dashed towards the girl. Half way to its victim, the giant insect seemed to have been hit with a invisible force that sapped most of its strength. At the same time, a brilliant explosion burst forth under the creature and a

jet of searing energy  
stabbed out from the  
woman and ripped into  
the behemoth. Virginia dug  
her heels into Studebaker  
and reined him into a  
tight circle around the  
solen. As she rode, she  
yelled out incantations  
that seemed to draw  
forces up out of the  
ground and from the  
walls of the cave and  
bring them down upon the  
hapless solen. The wizards  
that sat in the group of  
spectators understood the  
words she spoke, but  
they had never before  
heard the dialect or  
accent with which Virginia  
spat them out. Little did  
they know that not only  
did Master Spur have  
access to Lost Lands  
scrolls, but that the girl  
mage had done much  
studying, too. The things  
that she had learned  
made short work of the  
insect queen. The beast  
crumbled to the cave  
floor with a final blast  
of energy rolling it to  
its back.

Studebaker slowed his  
gallop and walked back to  
the semi-circle. Virginia  
stood erect in the  
stirrups, her back stiff  
and her neck muscles  
strained. Her hands were  
held away from her sides  
and her fingers danced as  
if playing some phantom  
instrument. Her eyes  
were rolled back, her  
eyelids fluttered, and a  
watery stream of blood  
flowed from one nostril.  
Horse and rider walked  
straight towards the  
bearded man who fell off  
his keg backwards in  
fright. He held up one  
hand as to halt her  
approach and pointed  
towards the solen corpse

with the other. "The loot!" he cried and pointed, "please, go claim your loot!"

His yells broke her trance and she sat down hard in the saddle. The color returned to her face, she blinked a few times and roughly wiped the drainage from her nose on her sleeve. She looked over her shoulder at the smoldering solen body, turned back to the bearded man and a wide, childlike grin spread across her face. One of the other warriors collected up the ant's belongings and handed them up to Virginia. The bearded one motioned to her.

"Come. You come and sit here by me!" as he pointed to the ground next to the keg. Virginia lowered herself to the ground and sat cross-legged by the man. "Could you stand an ale for your thirst, Little One?" he asked her.

"Ale?" she replied, "now that wouldn't be very ladylike, now would it?" She paused, "Have you got any hard liquor?" So on into the night, and also into the day, the game went on. The mages present hounded Virginia with questions as to her arcane knowledge and practiced phrases with her. In the end, she had killed five of the queens and the time had come for her to return to the chambers of the ambitious queen.